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## **Is this Chick Lit from the Middle East? Examining Ameera Al Hakawati's *Desperate in Dubai* as Chick Lit**

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### **Abstract:**

Chick lit is essentially novels written by women, about women and for women. It has gathered worldwide popularity with its empowered heroines and very soon seeped into cultures different from the west. This worldwide infiltration retained most of the characteristics of the mother genre but deviated significantly in its handling of freedom, society and relationships. Chick lit of the Middle East recounts the experiences of young, educated and smart women of the Middle East and how she deals with her life, career and relationships. Ameera Al Hakawati's *Desperate in Dubai* published in 2011 was a National bestseller and through the lives of four accomplished women we will examine how the women adapt and adept themselves to suit the Middle Eastern palate.

**Keywords:** Chick lit, Arab chick lit, Ameera Al Hakawati, Transnational , commodity worship, niqab.

Chicklit as a genre saw a flourish with the popularity of the British pop-group, Spice Girls , with their very popular song "What I really, really want..." and with the publication of Helen Fieldings 1996 novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary* . But the genre acquired its name from the title of Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell's anthology of women centered fiction writing, *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*, published in 1995. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young tried to define chick lit as featuring 'single women in their twenties and thirties navigating their generations challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships' (Ferriss and Young 3). But a more comprehensive definition was tried by Sarah Gormley in 2009 tried to describe the genre as a form of contemporary popular fiction that

by the end of the 1990s ... had become established to describe novels written by women, (largely) for women, depicting the life, loves, trials and tribulations of their predominantly young, single, urban, female protagonists. ... whilst plotlines are variable,

chick lit can be internally defined by the structure of a female central character “seeking personal fulfilment in a romance-consumer-comedic vein.” ... By the end of the last decade of the twentieth century, the genre of chick lit was also identifiable by the establishment of “clearly marked jacket designs.” Indeed, chick lit’s bold, pink or pastelcoloured covers with cursive fonts and line drawings of handbags or shoes seem ubiquitous, at least in the U.K., gracing the shelves of bookstores, supermarkets, railway station and airport shops. (Gormley)

Scholars like Mlynowski and Jacobs , feel that “Chick lit is not all about shoes.... Chick Lit is often upbeat, always funny fiction about contemporary female characters and their everyday struggles with work, home, friendship, family, or love....It’s generally written by women for women.” (Mlynowski and Jacobs 10)

Before we begin to think that chick lit is all about cliqued plotlines of young, single, white, heterosexual, financially independent women written in a humorous narrative, we must understand that there are many offshoots to the genre and that chick lit is merely a generic term used to include all these diverse literatures. Cathy Yardley provides a list of the sub genres which includes “Chick Lit Mystery and Tart Noir”, “Mommy Lit”, “Bride Lit”, “Full-Figured Lit”, “Ethnic Chick-Lit”, “Teen Lit”, “Nanny Lit”, etc, each marked out and marketed for its multitudinous categories of female readers. Some of the modern chick lit even feature gay characters as sub characters in relation to the heroine as opposed to the heterosexuality norms espoused in traditional romance novels. Some of the other intriguing sub genres are those transnational chick lits that have been inspired by American and British chick lits, like chick lits from the Arab regions and West Asia, especially India. These are places where the freedoms enjoyed by our American and British heroines are practiced but only in theory. But these sub genres are gaining wide readership and popularity.

The popularity of chick lit has inspired a number of women writers even in the religiously conservative Arab countries to dabble in writings that resemble the easy style and honesty of chick lit writing. A. Rochelle Mabry states in her essay *About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary ‘Chick’ Culture* that, “Chick lit ...usually focus on a female main character and use a variety of strategies to make her desires and motivations the focus of the story...written in first person, in the heroines voice, conveying the notion that these novels, although fictional, are authentic, in-depth accounts of women’s experiences.”(Mabry 195-6). It is this movement towards the first person narration, away from the third person narrative as seen in traditional romance novels, which makes the change significant.

The Arab World consists of 22 countries in the Middle East and North Africa: Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Arab countries have a rich diversity of ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities. But the one common factor that pertains to the women is that the women

as voiceless and wrapped up silent by the strict and stringent patriarchal and religious bindings that prevail in these countries. This voicelessness is reflected by the fact that there are very writings few by women for women.

With the rise of technology, the internet has developed into a platform to sound ideas, experiences and opinions of women, who otherwise would have difficulty voicing it to the public. Young Arab writers are venturing into writing and sharing their literature on the web. There are blogs by young Arab women, where they record experiences which are in sharp contrast to the publicly perceived notions of the women and their experiences in the Middle East. It often speaks of a world different from the world they seem to live in. These new generation Arab women reveal a world hidden within their *abayas*, a world that they like to believe is free of restraints and shackles, but is never out of the range of the ever lurking patriarchy. The much discussed *Girls of Riyadh* by Rajaa Alsanea is written in the form of emails, speaks of four professional young women in Saudi and gives a brazen account of what happens among the Saudi elite women. The first person narration that takes the reader through the novel helps them identify with the narrator. These blogs and other electronic media serve as platforms through which these writers try to reinforce the notion of intimacy with the reader.

*Desperate in Dubai* is written in a similar vein and tone as *Girls of Riyadh*. Ameera Al Hakawati's *Desperate in Dubai* published in 2011 is her first novel, which has been banned in Dubai and taken off the bookshelves for its obvious scandalous content. The idea for the book was developed in a blog by the same author with an ardent and loyal fan following. It is interesting to note that Ameera Al Hakawati is her pseudonym and Hakawati means "storyteller" in Arabic. It is a common practice for these young writers to write under a pseudonym because it gives them the chance to write candidly about experiences and stories that are not openly not accepted in a conservative muslim community. Ameera Al Hakawati, herself claims that her blog was blocked because of the apparent shocking details of life in Dubai. But it is noteworthy that her book was national bestseller which speaks volume of the popularity of its content.

The book is about four women, whose lives are interconnected and who are trying to make the best of their lives in the cosmopolitan city of Dubai. Lady Luxe, who leads a double life as Jennifer for her escapades, is a Emirati heiress. She tries to rebel against the strict rules of her father's religion and enjoys her freedom with her secret identity. She is an acclaimed designer of *abayas* and a successful entrepreneur. Leila Saade is her Lebanese friend who has left her conservative parents behind and has come to Dubai in the hopes of marrying a rich husband and making a career for herself. The choices she makes in her life are individual, but her energies are focused on finding herself a wealthy husband. The third prominent character is Sugar and is British of Indian origins. She also doubles as the omniscient narrator of the story. Sugar has come to Dubai to forget her painful first love and to build a new life for herself. Nadia Ziani is a crucial character who moves to Dubai, leaving behind a blossoming career in London,

to support her husband, David. Instead catches her husband in the midst of an affair and vows to wreck vengeance on the cheating pair.

*Desperate in Dubai* has the trimmings of a novel belonging to the chick lit genre, with its glossy cover page with the picture of a fashionable attractive young woman wearing classy sunglasses to its pages strewn with designer brands and accessories of high fashion. The autobiographical parallel between the author and the protagonist is key feature of chick lit. Ameera Al Hakawati, though anonymous, is known to be working with Corporate Communication like the narrator of *Desperate in Dubai*, Sugar. The easy and catchy nature of the narration is a very key feature of popular chick lit.

“Chick lit’s most salient feature is its city setting. Chick lit occasionally is called “metro lit”.”(Harzewski 30). The story is set in Dubai, the ultimate land where all dreams come true. Each of the character come to Dubai for their own reasons. Sugar to escape a turbulent and disturbing past in London, Leila to catch herself a wealthy husband and to prove to her conservative family in Lebanon that she was successful, Nadia to be with her husband and to support his career and Lady Luxe because being a Muslim she is bound to be under the patronage of her Emirati father. The cosmopolitan culture of Dubai is an omniscient presence in the novel.

The characters in this book are all empowered with money power they can call their own or by inheritance. Though Sugar is the chronicler of the four lives it is Lady Luxe who is easily the most striking character with all the trappings of a post feminist chick lit heroine. She provides details of the society she navigates in. Lady Luxe is the daughter of a very powerful Emirati (native arab) and while under the patronage of her father, which is a common practice for a woman in the Middle East, she dare not incur the wrath of her father and brother. It is not because she cared about “tarnishing her reputation and becoming unmarriageable. ...what she does care about is risking her life. Honour killings may not make the headlines, or even trickle into community gossip, but after what happened to her cousin, she knows better to flaunt her escapades.”(Hakawati 7). So while in London “she utilized every bit of her freedom as if it were her last, knowing that eventually the time would come to an end and she would have to return home and continue living an unfulfilled double life.”(Hakawati 8). She leads a wanton life in London as Jennifer, who lives in anonymity and not as the daughter of her powerful father. Lady Luxe, lives most of her life on her own terms. She convinces her father that she had to study Fashion in Britain’s most prestigious institutions and also manages to set up her own line designer *abayas*. Unknown to her father and brother she parties late in the night and sleeps around with a variety of men.

The chick lit heroine is as Stephanie Harzewski posits, “often highly conscious or critical of her own physical appearance, with obsessive concern about caloric intake.”(Harzewski 29).

It is through Leila that the author brings out the obsession with the body. Leila the Lebanese expat is described in detail. "Leila is not overtly beautiful; her lips are a bit too big (too much collagen). Her nose is a bit too sharp (an over-enthusiastic cosmetic surgeon) and her eye brows are a tad too thin (no one to blame but herself). However, her big, blonde hair (courtesy of a fabulous hair stylist), smooth skin (La Mer and monthly glycolic peels), double D's (a souvenir from Beverly Hills), and a firm behind (her maternal genes) more than compensate for her aesthetically-off facial features." Leila is on the lookout for a wealthy husband and is in constant fear of her "biological clock ticking". She examines the minute changes to her body. "A fine line here, a wrinkle there, a sun spot, an ache....she just doesn't move with the same agility she did a decade ago, her face doesn't hold the same youthful glow, and no amount of gym, microdermabrasions, or sneaky visits to clinics in Jumeirah can prevent time from taking its natural course." (Hakawati 330).

*Desperate in Dubai* has all the makings of what we consider to be chick lit with a few variations to suit a Middle Eastern palette. One distinct feature of Middle Eastern chick lit is that the family is invariably involved. The heroines are trying to walk a thin line between total liberty as enjoyed by their western counterparts and their ethnicity. We find all the four characters struggling against cultural expectations and at the same time trying to achieve their own dreams and aspirations. And like their western counterparts they too seem focused on acquiring wealth, fame, success, security and happiness. The novel, through the life of these women, shows us how difficult it was for these modern heroines to actually cross boundaries and step into the horizon of freedom.

But it is noteworthy that while the Arab heroines are empowered, financially independent and act their mind (most of the time) they fail to exercise the liberties and individual choices exercised by their western counterparts owing to the stringent patriarchy that prevails in the Middle East. There is a very obvious search for Mr. Right. Marriage takes a centre stage in the Arabic chick lit largely because the Middle Eastern culture demands it. But the heroines are willing to negotiate marriage on their own terms rather than leave it to parental will. The American and British chick lit would invariably have a happy ending, either, with wedding bells sounding or at least the promise of marriage and sometimes it may have the heroine walking off into the horizon with better prospects of happiness which would consistently involve marriage. The western chick lit heroine has a greater palette of opportunities awaiting her while for her Middle Eastern counterpart has the limited option of having a happy ending inevitably involved tying the knot or staying within the precincts of patriarchal protection.

Specifically these women, like Lady Luxe who steps out of the role that is decided for her by her culture lives in within their culture coping with male hegemony. Dubai, inspite of its varied cosmopolitan culture, is still Muslim territory where women as subjugated and rendered voiceless. They are expected to behave and dress modestly and cover their heads with and *abaya*

or *niqab*. It is worth noticing that the *niqab* which is an item of clothing prescribed for the muslim woman is the very garment they find stifling. We find both Lady Luxe's and Leila's experiences with the niqab were very unpleasant. Lady Luxe comments about the niqab (a veil for the face that leaves the area around the eyes clear.) Which is a head dress worn commonly in middle eastern countries, which she happens to wear once, "How women can cover their face on a daily basis is beyond her comprehension. Already she feels as if she is being smothered." (Hakawati 310). Leila, "struggling to breathe under the constricting cloth" (Hakawati 483). The irony lies in the fact that Lady Luxe is renowned for designer *abayas*, while she herself abstains from its use except to impress the clientele or her family.

Women dare not step boundaries for fear of risking their lives to honour killings. Lady Luxe can only enjoy her freedom as Jennifer with the blonde wig and contact lenses. Lady Luxe's brother, Mohammed, when he discovers her alter existence as Jennifer, is livid with silent rage. He comments to Leila, "People who openly disrespect the traditions and religion of this country must know that their actions will eventually bear unsavoury consequences. And then they will have no one to blame but themselves." (Hakawati 432) They are constantly moral policed and the slightest act of defiance is met with heavy punishment and consequences. Yet these heroines live their dreams on their terms. For the transnational Middle Eastern woman the freedom she enjoys is at a price and a risk. When Lady Luxe adventures are made known to her family she is beaten physically, humiliated and disowned never to see her paternal family again.

Violence against women is an accepted action and it is never questioned. Lady Luxe's brother, Mohammed, grabs her wrist strong enough to break her arm in two when she dared retaliate to a demeaning comment from him. Soon after the incident we find her going about her day as usual, giving us the impression that this kind of violent behavior was common and accepted in the society she lived in. The approval, acceptance and patronage of her family are something these women cannot exist without. She is careful about sending SMS to her father and brother every time she is out late. But "neither bothers to reply."

The conclusion to the novel ends on a satisfying note for all the four women. They find their own happiness. Sugar and Leila have chances of security with men of their choice; Nadia attains redemption and peace; and Lady Luxe is deprived off all her wealth, but finds the man she loves. But it is interesting to note that the entire characters move out of the conservative, rule-class-race bound Arab country to be able to live their life as they choose. This need to travel borders to accomplish their life and dreams is a common feature of chick lit that belongs to more conservative regions.

The narrator at one point is told by her boyfriend, "you're clever and quick-witted, and you know how to take care of yourself. But you also let others take care of you, and I like that too. Sometimes you are hard, sometimes you are soft, but you are never weak." (Hakawati 468).

This is what the new chick lit heroine is. She is seen to go through different difficult phases in her life, with élan and poise. No matter how difficult the situation she finds her way out of it unlike the heroines of the past. But it would be ambitious to generalize the western women and Middle Eastern women experiences and stories, as they do not share a common history, culture or religion. The Middle Eastern women share an experience unique to themselves and it is this experience that is reflected in the chick lit of that region. *Desperate in Dubai* does not exemplify the western chick lit but it does initiate a cultural dialogue of young women in a conservative patriarchal society, where they have remained voiceless for a long time.

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